

The God who JUST IS

Exodus 3:1-15 & Matthew 16:21-28

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As Moses contemplates a bush that is on fire but not burning, he is drawn to ask a very fundamental question. What is God's name?

Wrapped up in God's name are questions about God's character. What does God think? How does God feel? What might God be expected to do?

It is hard to think of more important questions than these.

By asking these questions, Moses is doing what we would call 'theology'.

Theology is something we all do, because we all ask those questions sometimes. A few centuries ago, theology was known as the queen of the sciences, but today only a few universities even have theology departments. Mostly, formal theological study happens in church institution.

I understand why that has happened, but I still think it is unfortunate to separate the study of God from the study of God's creation. Moses had his conversation with God while walking through creation, going about his ordinary work – not in a separate religious space. We don't even know that he was praying at the time.

Clearly, God can speak through creation. And that shouldn't surprise us because all artwork tells us something about the artist who created it.

So let's talk about art for bit.

When you go to an art gallery, are you the sort of person who reads the little descriptions next to the artwork? I am the sort of person who sometimes forces myself to read them, because I'd rather just look at the art! But when I do read them, I usually find they give me a better appreciation of the artist and the art.

They are very short, though. There is so much more to the artist and the artwork than can fit on a little exhibition label. And while most of these labels are excellent, sometimes the limitations and prejudices of the gallery management find their way onto the label. This one I made is just to boast that I know the artist! When I lived in China, I knew I wouldn't find anything critical of the government on those labels. In Australia, it is almost the opposite.

The human activity we call theology (the study of God) is a bit like those little exhibition labels. Theology can help us see how creation reveals God's character and how knowledge of God's character helps us live well in creation. But sometimes our prejudices get in the way of us seeing the full Glory of our creator. And the full glory of our creator is beyond our little minds anyway!

All that means we need a lot of humility to think about God well. We are reminded of that all through the Scriptures.

When we wandered through the book of Genesis recently, we met Hagar, the Egyptian slave who was exploited by Abraham and Sarah, who was the first person in Scripture to give God a name – the first person to do the work of theology. That means that one of the first things the Scriptures tell us about theology is that outsider perspectives are important.

It is not just insiders who get to do the work of theology – not just Abraham and his descendants, not just clergy, not just Christians – but also outsiders.

Listening to outsiders helps us see our prejudices. It helps us see the things our community has assumed about God, that are not necessarily so. It is never comfortable but if we want to hold and pass on beliefs about God that are true and life-giving, then we will allow our theology to be refined by listening to people who disagree with us.

Hope, Ginninderra is living in this space of two communities coming together – similar communities in many ways but with some small differences in things like how Sunday services might look, how to read the Bible, perhaps, and maybe how to communicate the gospel and how we can expect God to be at work in the world and in our lives.

I can see that this coming together has been managed very graciously. That doesn't mean there won't be some uncomfortable moments when some of you might be surprised by things others do or think. Let's keep making the most of those opportunities, not just to be well mannered, (though, that!) but to learn from each other. Maybe someone I disagree with knows something about God that I haven't learned yet? Maybe, in there among the true things I believe about God, there is something that needs to be refined, and maybe this other person has a perspective that will help me see God more clearly.

That is part of the message of Genesis, and as we move into Exodus, we find another step in theology that is just as important. We find Moses, having grown up and run away from Egypt, working in Midian as a shepherd. He is confused by a bush that is on fire but is not burning up.

There is so much we might say about this scene. It is such a rich image!

Today, let's notice that God is speaking through something mysterious and inexplicable. That is often how we come to new insights – how our prejudices and misconceptions sometimes fall away – when something comes along that just doesn't fit into our previous understanding of the world and of God. Sometimes those moments open our minds just enough for God's voice to be heard.

Sometimes people think God can only speak in a church, or when we are reading the Bible and praying. All of us tend to expect God to speak in certain places and not others. We sometimes limit God – we put God in a box.

God won't have any of that! As we see in God's conversation with Moses.

Moses is trying to wriggle out of his calling. First, he says, "You've got the wrong guy!" But God insists. Then Moses starts worrying about the marketing. How am I going to package you? What's your public image going to be? What should we call your Instagram profile? What name should I use when I introduce you?

Yeah, God's not OK with being boxed and packaged. The name God gives is notoriously hard to translate. "I AM" is the best we can do, but what does that mean? Even the tense is tricky. It could be "I am who I am" or "I will be who I will be", maybe "I am being itself" or "I am whoever I jolly well say I am." Which is pretty close to saying, "You can't define me. You will never pin me down." God is the God who IS – who JUST IS!

Built into the very name of God is the instruction to stop putting limits on God – stop thinking we can tell God what God is and isn't allowed to do; where God is and isn't allowed

to be. Because God Is – JUST IS - our theology will never be final or sufficient. God will burst out of any box we put God in just as Jesus couldn't be held by the tomb.

It is actually a lot like that. Once we put God in a nice, neat, sealed box, all correct and satisfactory, then our theology is dead, and we will need new resurrection light to see that God is bigger than anybody's theology.

But ever since Moses, religious traditions have tried to limit God – to keep God in a box, to put restrictions on who God can be, what God can do, what God can say and how God can say it.

And that is what we see Peter doing with Jesus: "Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, 'God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.'"

Peter had just declared Jesus to be the Messiah, the Son of the living God, and Jesus commended him for that. But his ideas about the messiah did not leave any room for suffering or for mortal defeat at the hands of enemies. No, surely there would be victory, there would be success, there would be conquest.

There would foes laying down their weapons at his feet. How could it possibly be otherwise? What was Peter to hope for if not that?

We might say today: What are Anglicans to hope for if not big Sunday Schools and full churches and healthy bank accounts that fund life-changing outreach?

Surely that's what God wants!

Surely, we are outside God's will if that's not what we see!

The gospel message that God works through defeat, failure and death is not one anyone wants to hear. Any time. If we are honest, we have all stood where Peter stands. We have all said to Jesus, "Surely you don't mean THAT!" And maybe we have been blessed along with Peter by Jesus's rebuke.

Jesus always rebukes us in love, to help us walk more faithfully in the truth, to help Peter in this case become the leader Jesus is forming him to be. It wasn't a rejection. It was an invitation back to the right path: to the hard road that passes through death but will take us to life beyond our imagining.

There was hope in Jesus's words, though Peter couldn't hear it:

*Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.*

The hope is on the other side of suffering, but because Peter can't bring himself to believe in the possibility of suffering, it is impossible for him to think about what resurrection might mean. He had closed himself off from hope because he had put God in a box. If our God is in a box we cannot conceive of the possibility of new life coming into the world. New possibilities. When we restrict God, we limit ourselves and we limit the world.

But Peter had called Jesus the Son of the *living* God. The son of the God who IS – who JUST IS. And that God will burst out of every box.

I sometimes hear people talk about Peter's generation as though they were particularly rigid; particularly closed to the new thing Jesus was doing. But it seems to me that every

generation is just as rigid – just as inclined to tell God what God can do, where and how God can speak, who God can be.

But if we want to hear the voice of God, we have to let God out of the box. We have to be open to new things.

God speaking through a burning bush - the creator speaking through creation: that was a new thing.

God leading a whole people group out of slavery: that was a new thing.

God speaking through Jesus, who was artist and artwork at once: that was a new thing.

The death and resurrection of the Messiah was a new thing.

And so I pray that this beautiful union of two parishes into Hope, Ginninderra will keep surprising us all with new possibilities and will keep revealing to our community that the God who IS – who JUST IS – is greater, more complex, more loving, more beautiful and more creative than they – or we – have ever imagined! Amen